

Editorial

## Paine Field lands a suitor ...

Neighbors will howl and politicians will pound on the table, but they will not keep commercial air service out of Snohomish County Airport.

Paine Field has been marking time until an air carrier saw enough regional market potential to stake a claim. After years of little or no industry interest, Allegiant Air, a Nevada-based airline, wants to start twice-a-week flights to Las Vegas. The basic question about commercial air service out of the county facility was resolved a year ago. For 30 years, opponents have argued an agreement, known as the Mediated Role Determination, precluded any expansion beyond general and corporate aviation, aviation-industry-related airport uses and commuter flights.

A comprehensive review of the document by a local citizens panel and an outside legal consultant concluded the county cannot prohibit or restrict scheduled passenger service; the county does not have to encourage or subsidize service; and the county can make airlines pay their own way.

Market demands are key, along with the fact the county had happily accepted tens of millions of federal dollars to operate and maintain the airport for decades.

The county does not get to pick and choose what kinds of planes use the airport, not without putting Federal Aviation Administration funding in jeopardy. A grant from the FAA Airport Improvement Program is in play right now for a new fire station.

Allegiant Air, which already serves Washington residents out of Bellingham and Pasco, flies a fleet of MD80-series jet aircraft. Company officials report they were drawn to Paine Field and Snohomish County by its demographics and relative isolation from an alternative low-cost carrier airport. A growing population has a time-consuming trip on heavily congested highways to get to Sea-Tac International Airport.

Terminal space at Paine Field is limited but available. A new area for segregating and holding screened passengers — a large, prefabricated structure, perhaps — is needed. More screeners would come from federal Transportation Security Administration. Fire equipment and police are in place.

For as much opposition as the Allegiant proposal will stir, there will be a sizable response from Snohomish County communities that see nearby passenger service as an overdue and necessary connection to their futures.

Snohomish County does not have to like what is coming, but after politic protestations, there is not much to be done. Flights to Las Vegas? Bet on it.

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